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FOREIGN SERVICE HOAXES

The Midnight Penman Returns

Curiouser and curiouser, this book *A History of the Modern Age* (Doubleday; \$7.95), which will be published next week. It is billed as the work of one Julian K. Prescott, a former U.S. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs who suffered a nervous breakdown in 1964 and died four years later, leaving his unfinished manuscript to his old friend Professor Neal F. Morrison for publication.

What a feast of previously unpublished material it contains—everything from an encounter between Joseph Stalin and Winston Churchill in a Kremlin steam bath ("a converted dungeon of the early czars") to Stalin's private reaction to North Korean Premier Kim Il-sung's invasion of South Korea in 1950: "That Asiatic m-----, Stalin cursed under his breath in Georgian, 'has made a fool of me.'"

Prescott gives particularly detailed accounts of White House policy sessions, during both the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations. And who but the indefatigable Prescott would have discovered that after meeting the Khrushchevs in Vienna in 1961, Jackie Kennedy observed to her husband as they prepared for bed: "I rather like him, and Mrs. Khrushchev is such a simple and unassuming woman. They're not as uppity as the De Gaulles."

Taking Revenge? According to Prescott's foreword, the history is based on his personal knowledge as well as on information obtained from such "faceless" functionaries as interpreters, bodyguards, valets, cooks, waiters and chauffeurs. Even more bizarre, Morrison's introduction points out that Prescott, "a Chekhovian-looking character" with "a weary sense of defeat," fleshed out his historical material with imaginary dialogue and even occasional fictitious characters. Morrison obviously has some misgivings. "Often, I confess, I was unable to separate 'fact' from 'invention,' so deftly did Prescott weave them together to give the illusion of veracity. Was Prescott mad, I wondered? Was he taking revenge on innocent readers like myself for



JOHN KENNETH GALBRAITH

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the grotesqueries that he had experienced in international politics, for the deceptions and lies he had swallowed?" Concludes Morrison: "The reader should be forewarned."

Indeed he should. This is neither the work of Diplomat Prescott nor Professor Morrison—both of whom, as it turns out, are as fictitious as a number of the book's minor characters. Rather, it is a fascinating chronicle of the cold war, valid in essence perhaps, fictional and caricatured in detail. It is a grand and eloquent hoax full of enigmatic private jokes like the consistent misspelling of Robert McNamara's name.

Aristotle and Jeremiah. But who is the mysterious satirist, himself apparently a veteran of the Kennedy years? The names of Theodore Sorensen and Pierre Salinger somehow do not come to mind. Could it be the midnight penman, John Kenneth Galbraith, who last struck in 1963 (with his pseudonymous *The McLandress Dimension*)? Prescott's editor at Doubleday, which also happens to be Galbraith's publisher, replies: "Why don't you ask him?" Last week, unfortunately, Galbraith was unreachable in Austria; his secretary said that he was "driving slowly" from an economists' meeting in the Tyrol toward his summer home in Gstaad.

The book contains only one reference to Galbraith by name, but it is a pregnant one. After the "prominent Harvard economist and wit" has made a cogent point to President Kennedy "in his amusingly ironic way" and then apologized for a gloomy prediction, Kennedy replies: "John, you can't scold us often enough, and as far as I'm concerned, you are both an Aristotle and a Jeremiah, a polymath and a prophet."

Where did the author get this previously unrecorded conversation? Was it a line overheard by J.F.K.'s chauffeur? A scene invented by Prescott in the throes of madness? A wink to the initials, alas, could have said for sure.

Galbraith, John Kenneth
Sec. 4.01.2 A History of
the Modern Age
The McLandress
Dimension

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